

Objects for Engaging Community

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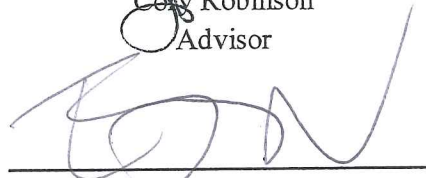
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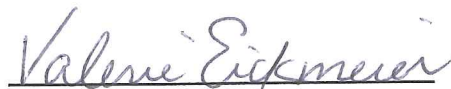


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A strong community has regard for ecological health, personal health, and intellectual health for everyone. As an artist and a designer, I create functional sculptures that encourage awareness and action towards creating a more vibrant society comprised of strong communities. These intriguing forms entice viewers to investigate what the sculptures offer. The take away may be a book, a packet of seeds for plants that will benefit pollinating insects, a seedling to grow your own vegetable plant, or just the thought that these elements are part of a healthy and locally focused community. Through my art and woodworking, I strive to have a conversation with the public about what is needed for a satisfactory life.

My interest and perception of culture started at a young age and has led me on many adventures and into new understanding. As a child, I helped my dad make a playhouse. Then I proceeded to bang together some 2 x 4s and plywood to make stools and a table to serve as furnishings. This is where I learned about the pride and sense of empowerment one can derive from making.

My youth was also filled with activities like 4-H Club that has set goals and positive community focus. The four main values set forth for positive impact in communities are: head (managing, thinking), heart (relating, caring), hands (giving, working), and health (being, living). These values are reflected strongly in my public engagement works.

I am making sense of prior life experiences by making unique interactive structures and furniture that are modes of communication about enriching our current culture and community by learning from the past. Four of my recent projects exemplify this work: “The Evolution of Reading”, “Community Cabinet”, “Seed Skep”, and “Sprouting Food”.

“The Evolution of Reading”, is a sculptural lending library, which is in White River State Park. “Evolution of Reading” is a modern, cave-like form that creates an educational experience about the history of reading and writing. (See slide.) Those who enter and explore the interior library may be surprised to find a timeline on the wall. The concept is to convey the development in reading and writing in our history as a progression, which has resulted in the current goal of the project- to encourage literacy and make books and information accessible and free to everyone. This aligns with my desire to promote intellectual health and educational development in a community.

The structure of “Evolution of Reading” is designed to be inviting for all people to have easy access to the timeline and the books inside. There are different height shelves so that physically anyone can grab a book. Children get very excited to have a bookshelf that is specifically sized for them. The intent of using a cave-like sculpture as a modern lending library is to reference the origin of communicating in written form. The first known written communication was via symbols, by the cave painters from the period of the Cro-Magnon Man.¹

The undulating curves and lines of “Evolution of Reading” metaphorically reference the steps and stages that have occurred in drafted communication.

Language is universal, but communicating through documentation was an invention. Aristotle said (on Interpretation), “Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience, and written words are the symbols of spoken words.”² This project references history and development by marrying old and new through construction techniques, materials, and concept.

My construction techniques are the combination of old-world quality and care for the material along with innovation through the use of new tools and technology. For example, I created a barrel-like shape. This is a unique shape because I used modern technology (computer numerical control router) to create very consistent strips of wood in a playful bouncy shape. These strips were cut from a larger sheet of wood that I laminated myself using classic furniture construction. Then I used a coopering technique (similar to what barrel makers use) to put an angle on the strips. Next I glued the strips together, which makes either a barrel shape or just a rolling plane with an undulating surface. The process of combining new and old technologies speaks to my reverence for creative endeavors that maintain a high quality standard and also the fact that we can learn from the past but embrace the present.

When I studied as a traditional furniture apprentice with Michael Cullen, a furniture designer and artist in Petaluma, CA, I specifically learned how craftsmanship speaks about one’s respect and a holistic approach to making and materials. By creating well-crafted objects, I am demonstrating respect for the material, the source of the material, and other people. I try to be ecologically minded in my studio practice.

The scenery of Northern California and the unusual architecture that I experienced while living in that region shaped my artistic practice, ideals, and aesthetic. I lived in several non-traditional buildings including a yurt, a gypsy wagon, a 14-sided one-room building, and a warehouse. From these experiences I learned that unusual environments encourage individuals to think and behave differently and I employed these observations into the design of “The Evolution of Reading”. By creating unique and exciting forms in my work I strive to stimulate people that encounter these sculptures.

I am intrigued with phenomenology and how different spaces and objects affect people. The study of how natural and constructed spaces affect our cognition and behavior is environmental psychology.³ Unique architecture and furniture encourages creativity, curiosity, and even altered awareness. We are stimulated by our surroundings in conscious and subconscious ways.

Structures with undulating lines and curves stimulate you differently than a room made with 2x4s and sheets of drywall. When a person walks into a non-traditional space made out of wood or a space changed by a wooden structure, one can be struck by a sensation of curiosity. She may just explore without trying to explain why. When faced with something out of the ordinary, we react unexpectedly.

My next project, “Seed Skep”, is about the environmental and personal benefit of helping bees. This sculpture is made out of western red cedar so that it can withstand the elements outdoors in the most environmentally friendly way. It houses native Indiana wildflower seed packets that people can take home and

plant to provide food and habitats for pollinators like bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds. This encourages ecological and personal health in a community because approximately one out of every three bites of food that we take are the result of pollination. Bees, specifically, are endangered due to several factors including: pesticides, global warming, and lack of habitat. Earth's inhabitants rely heavily on the pollination of many types of food, and it is said that humans won't last long without bees.⁴ There is an informative brochure available inside sculpture so that seeds and awareness are being spread in communities.

"Seed Skep" is in the shape of what people recognize to be a traditional beehive, but is actually an abstraction of the iconic beehive shape called a skep. Skeps are traditionally made out of braided grass to make a basket and then turned upside down and covered with mud. People have been making skeps for over 2,000 years. The form of the skep uses the idea of iconography so that passersby recognize the form of a beehive. A person sees the sculpture and associates bees and honey with that shape.

As well as being informed and having access to information, another important need for society is access to healthy food. The interactive sculpture, "Sprouting Food" is made of two functioning miniature greenhouses in the shape of sprouting seedlings. The greenhouses each hold about 15-20 food seedlings that are easy to grow such as tomatoes, basil, sweet peppers, etc. The goal of these miniature greenhouses is for people to take a seedling home, and then experience what it is like to grow something edible.

There is an old saying, “The plant died on the windowsill and the teacher kept on teaching.” This lesson refers to the fact that adults and children can learn a lot from growing our own food. Personal health, experiencing a natural growth cycle, and localized living are the driving concepts of “Sprouting Seed”. The shape of “Sprouting Food” is also referencing the growth of a vibrant community and culture.

Before industrialization in the 1900s, more people grew their own food.⁵ We can learn from the past to see how gardening is healthier for individuals and the environment. Growing food in your backyard helps the environment by not using up fossil fuels in transportation and think about the food you are providing for pollinators!

“Seed Skep” and “Sprouting Food” are sculptures that will be housed at local businesses during the months of May and June 2016. The purpose of involving locally owned and operated businesses is that it is a community project that should be supported by the community. Also, this collaborative allows for different demographics to be reached by the work. By having these sculptures in more public places, there is more opportunity for the public to experience them.

These projects have been made possible by support and donations from local businesses, community members, and friends. The fact that there is a collective enthusiasm to make Indianapolis a better place makes me feel as though these projects are successful. People have participated in different forms to make these projects happen, and this is the result of a vibrant community working together.

“Community Cabinet” is a sculpture that was successful mainly because of the people that participated. There are drawers that you can pull out from the side of the cabinet. The drawer knobs are traditional knobs so naturally people recognize the suggested action, and then pull them open. Inside one can find a form to fill out to offer something to someone else in the community. (See pics) I documented the various offerings people filled out. There were at least 40 offerings donated ranging from a beer, advice, woodworking tips, a monotype print, to a water balloon fight in a local park.

This social engagement speaks to the idea of collaborating with the public to make the community better and more open-minded about offering something or interacting with others. There is no obligation to leave an ‘offering’ or to take an ‘offering’, but I designed the piece so that passersby would at least notice it: the cabinet is 8’ tall and red. Back to the idea of phenomenology, a non-traditional cabinet form may encourage individuals to react in unexpected ways.

These works are called socially engaged art (SEA) because: they are all available to the public, people interact, and the desired result is a benefit to society. Different avenues of SEA that Pablo Helguera discussed in his book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, were utilized in “Community Cabinet”. By giving the option to write an offering on a form, there are creative and directed collaboration aspects of socially engaged art. There is a reflective aspect about how people interacted with and perceived this cabinet.⁶

This project took place at Herron School of Art and Design where I am a teacher and a student. By having the opportunity to work with any passersby in

the hallway, I had a conversation with active participants about what type of thing they are willing to offer other people. Some responses were beneficial to both parties, the person who took the offering and the one who gave it.

In 2012, I took a trip to Southeast Asia to work with Burmese Refugees. The journey resulted in a desire to encourage and help foster what I experienced there—a caring community. Hence, my interest in socially engaged art. These sculptures are site specific with desired outcomes that pertain directly to the communities where they are located. The diverse audiences are a big part of why I have chosen these places.⁷ My hope is that I'll have the opportunity to reach a wider audience in future too.

Raising awareness in a diverse audience provides the opportunity for people to work together for change. From the journal, *Participations*, I read a volume titled, "Practicing equality? Issues for co-creative and participatory practices addressing social justice and equality." Authors, Paul Harris and Chris Fremantle, explain how socially engaged art, collaboration, and participatory art generally are created by and in reaction to the need for equality and social justice for a marginalized group of people.⁹ The permanent location of "Sprouting Food" and "Seed Skep" is Englewood, which is a transitional neighborhood in Indianapolis. Through conversations with other locals of the area, I believe the community there can benefit from these sculptures.

It is also important to me that not only 'marginalized groups' have access to these works, but the public in general. My work refers to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights for what one needs for a chance at a joyful and

content life. Part I of Article 27 pertains to why I'm interested in working with the public:

"Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."⁹

I am making public artwork a platform for positive change in communities. This is happening by providing something to take from these interactive artworks. I can receive and give information through my work, if I am creating visual stimulation that leads to conversation or action. In other words, collaborating with the public creates an opportunity for exchange. In the book *Conversation Pieces*, Grant Kester points out the idea of having the audience and the artist communicate through the art and potentially change the artist's understanding of the world.¹⁰

Through engaging the public with items I make and offering the opportunity to take something, there is an exchange of ideas and a continued motion towards a more localized and self-realized lifestyle. The experience of being in front of a wooden structure that is made using traditional construction techniques as well as modern technology inspires curiosity and hopefully a desire to seek quality as well as innovation.

We can learn from the past and reanalyze what constitutes a quality life. There is resurgence in the interest in making our own goods and growing our own food. People want to be connected to 'real' things that come from neighbors

in a community rather than things that are the product of those less fortunate in foreign countries.

I hope that my work encourages new thought and a different mind-set about what creates a quality lifestyle through public involvement and unique visual and tactile spaces. I want to make art, woodworking, and design more accessible to everyone despite social class. Experiences like living in Southeast Asia have also lead me to the desire to have a conversation with people about how our consumerist culture impacts us all. Where objects we purchase are made, how they are made, and what they are made from - are important questions when you think about global culture and commerce. By sharing my craft and by teaching, I can see what benefits are derived from making and it opens a conversation about what we need for a satisfying life.

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